

Unions Will Organize Cowboys But It'll Take Language Study

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Page 12

MERTZON — Out here in the short grass country there's a general feeling that it's only a matter of time until the agricultural worker is unionized. And although not one of the labor chieftains has said so expressly, it's a safe bet that sheepherders and other types of windshield cowboys will be included.

At odd moments I have thought about this impending change and have concluded that if we were to be part of, say, Sheep & Cow Drivers Local No. 118, someone had better get busy and shape up our vocabulary to that workers' contracts wouldn't be so cloudy as to dumbfound a linguist of the stature of Noah Webster or Sam Johnson.

I've been concerned with labor leaders being able to decipher and translate our idiom mainly because I've always contended that ranch bosses (past and present) knew perfectly well what we workers were talking about, but didn't want to let on like they did for fear we'd try to beat them out of something.

So I began to jot down notes and came up with three phrases as a basis for preliminary work:

1. "Be in the pasture the minute you can see."

This is a command used innumerable times during roundups. Obviously, if there is to be a contract between employer and employee, the command must be defined in order for anyone to know exactly when to go to work.

What does it mean? Should the hands be in the pasture when everyone can see? Or should they be there when the men who will really look can see?

The question has always been confusing. One morning a group of cowboys may include men so sleepy-headed and sorefooted from a soft shoe bout the night before that they couldn't see the Empire State Building if every floor was lighted by airport beacons. The following morning, after 24 hours of rest and fresh country air, the same men may be able to read the brand on a black cow in weather so foggy the most intrepid astronaut who ever floated in space wouldn't ride the elevator at the launching base, much less leave the ground in an aircraft.

It must also be considered that there are usually a few eagle-eyed viejos in the crew who have long ago foresworn city lights and are able to pick out any four-legged creature in the predawn light, be it the shadow of a half-starved woodchuck or the crouching form of a baby jackrabbit.

Therefore in order to work this phrase into a written labor agreement, it appears that it must be specified who is supposed to be at the pasture gate the minute it is possible to see.

One solution would be to state clearly that the sharp-eyed characters, after passing the Air Force visual examination, should be at the gate before dawn. Those with fuzzy vision could be excused for the day and dispatched to picket an out-of-the-way establishment where there is ample drinking water, abundant shade, and no danger of being struck by heavy traffic.

The next phrase:

"Give 'em hell but don't chouse 'em."

It's impossible to guess how often this exhortation is used on a ranch, and if the union is going to determine how its members are going to react to it, the phrase must be defined.

One way to do it would be to reword the command to: "Devote all your strength and talents toward convincing the animals to concur with your wishes, but do so in a manner that will not overly excite the creatures."

Phrase No. 3;

"Just toodle and drift them" over to such-and-such a place.

This is indeed a sticky one to translate. Does "toodle" come from the Anglo Saxon word meaning "to play on a flute"? Or is it some corruption of an early Spanish word that ranchers adopted without regard for its original meaning?

The same goes for "drift." Does it mean to wander aimlessly across the prairie like a tumbleweed? At what rate of speed does one progress when drifting?

To further obscure the meaning of the command, ranch bosses will often say: "Toodle and drift them along, but be back here by dinner." Will the union boss require a clause in the contract exempting the drover who arrives, say, a day late due to some unforeseen difficulty such as inclement weather? Or should the agreement specify that the commands "toodle" and "drift" be forbidden, and the word "Go to the pasture and, if God is willing, have them at the house by dinner" be substituted.

Of course, regardless of what is done to clarify “toodle” and “drift,” a certain amount of accuracy will be lost as there just aren’t any other words to replace these terms of command.

The above ranch phrases are only a few of those that need clarification. Others are far more difficult to handle. I have purposely avoided such words as “sook” and “saw.” Dictionary authors don’t know what they mean or even realize they exist.

But however it turns out, I guess old George Meany and Walter Reuther can understand us well enough to get our names and money, which is a big step in carrying out any type of union activity. After all, they’ve always seemed to understand the double-talk dished out by politicians in and out of Washington, so it shouldn’t take them long to learn our tongue.